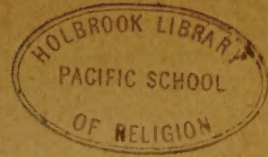


The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM



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DEAR MEMBER,

The Bishop of Durham has sent me a memorandum, the writer of which holds an important position in the educational world. It is a remarkably clear and cogent statement of the crucial problem in the relation of Christian faith to modern society, as it presents itself in the field of education. The paper describes the attitude of a friend of the writer, whom for convenience we shall call Robinson, to the place of religion in schools. Robinson is a teacher of about forty years of age, and his attitude, it is suggested, may be taken as typical of that of many other teachers. This is what the memorandum says :—

“ Robinson’s distrust of the Churches in education owes something to the bad history of the dual system, but is much more explicitly due to professional jealousy. Teaching, he maintains, is the teachers’ business, and they know more about it than most parsons do ; he feels competent to give religious instruction without the assistance of the clergy. Moreover, it is his strong conviction that the curriculum should form a coherent and properly balanced whole, which ought to include religious—or at least moral—education. He wants this complete curriculum to be school-controlled and school-centred. He therefore objects to anything that takes away from its completeness, including the regrouping of pupils for religious instruction on a denominational basis, whether by their withdrawal from the school for the purpose, or by any other arrangements. In his opinion the Sunday School is the place for denominational teaching. He is not hostile to church-membership in itself, provided that it does not cut into the school life ; though he is inclined to regard adherence to a particular denomination as being somewhat small-minded and seems to conceive the possibility of some sort of generalized Christianity which transcends all sects.

“ Quite clearly he can find no place for the Churches in a modern system of education, except as leisure-time societies. The whole social pattern, economic and cultural, has been so secularized that the Churches have become anachronistic and difficult to fit into the design. Ideas about social and educational reconstruction flow in secular channels. Like most of us in these days, my friend Robinson finds little difficulty in imagining a social pattern including family allowances and all-in insurance schemes, a perfected medical service, continued education up to eighteen with gradual and educationally controlled induction into paid employment, community centres where facilities for education, recreation and general culture are available for people of all ages—in fact, the whole apparatus of a planned democracy. It is fairly easy to see all this as a coherent picture ; it all fits together. But when I ask what he will do about places of worship in his state-provided community centre, he usually answers rather irritably that he is only trying to rough in the general lines of the thing and doesn’t pretend to fill in all the details. At the same time I make a mental note that, if culture is going to be institutionalized under public authority, the position of the Churches is bound to be anomalous.

“ If I have not already made it clear, I should explain that Robinson has no quarrel with religion in itself, provided that there is not too much of the transcendental or the institutional about it. I have said something about his attitude to the institutional side of religion ; as a matter of fact he is ready to admit that he undervalues the corporate aspect of religion. His distrust of the transcendental is due to the fact that for him, as for many people nowadays whose beliefs are governed by what they call a scientific point of view, the supernatural has come to mean the unnatural or anti-natural (that is to say, the impossible). The consequence

is that, for Robinson, religious education virtually means moral training. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say ethico-aesthetic education. As far as I can make out, what he means by religion is man's highest aspirations rather than God's saving grace. 'God' is for him a poetic name for the rather nebulous goal of man's upward strivings. He distrusts the clergy because they seem to take the language of religion too literally."

One could not wish for a better formulation of a major issue. It is the same question as was propounded with great force some years ago by Professor John Dewey, the outstanding figure among American educators. He laid it down quite explicitly that you could not realize a democratic ideal of education unless Christians were prepared to give up their supernatural claims, which were the source of a basic division in society. If the Churches claimed to have a unique relation to the highest values, it was impossible for them to share in the promotion of social ends on a natural and equal human basis.

The problem has come to a head in our time. Never before in history has a community attempted to educate the whole of its members. Even the rudimentary beginnings of imparting to all the technical ability to read, write and count are within living memory, and it is only now that the enterprise is assuming the form of a conscious, comprehensive, planned attempt in the light of growing psychological knowledge to shape the outlook and character of the entire rising generation.

The questions involved are not, as Robinson supposes, primarily questions of efficient educational administration and practice. They have to do with ultimate beliefs regarding the nature of man and society and human destiny. There is no question that concerns man more deeply than the question whether he has only a temporal existence or whether, as Christianity asserts, what makes him man is his relation, however much he may forget or deny it, to a transcendent Being. It is just as little possible, without letting Christianity go altogether, to brush aside the Church as an irrelevance. No failings of the actual Church can do away with the fact that Christ was the founder of a new society, which has handed on the faith from generation to generation, and that to be a Christian is to be a member of that society. What Professor Dewey and Robinson are really asking is that Christians should give up the fundamental beliefs which give Christianity its significance in order to facilitate the smooth working of a democratic society.

The issues at stake are among the profoundest and most far-reaching in history. They admit of no easy solution. They have to be viewed and understood from the side of the educator and of the nation as well as from that of the Church. There is no easy leap from what Christians believe to a vindication of the dual system, or to the right of entry of the parson into the school, or to any particular means of providing denominational teaching. There is a proper autonomy of the educational task in its own sphere which must be respected. Christians must not demand what denies or impairs this autonomy.

It is equally wrong, on the other hand, for the schools to advance totalitarian claims. Education, in the full sense of the term, cannot be centred in the school. The family, as Mrs. Bliss showed convincingly in her recent Supplement, is an educational agency of equal importance, and one of the major tasks to-day in education is to bring about effective co-operation between the home and the school. The Church also, as a community embracing both old and young and concerned with the ultimate meaning of life, has an indispensable function to fulfil in education.¹ One of the wisest things ever said about education is that of all the parties concerned in it—the State, the Church, the family, the parish or local community, the teacher and the pupil—none can claim to possess absolute authority, or to speak the final and decisive word.

¹ This is strongly and rightly urged in the pamphlet, *The Church and its Youth*, issued by the Youth Department of the British Council of Churches (56 Bloomsbury Street, W.C. 1, 2d.). Attention may also again be called to *The Family Church*, by H. A. Hamilton (Religious Education Press, Manor Road, Wallington, Surrey, 1s. 6d.), the importance of which is out of all proportion to its size.

The outstanding effect of Christianity on the history of the Western world was that it broke up the unity of ancient society, in which religion was one expression of the total life of the community, and taught men that they had a double allegiance—to a transcendent God as well as to an earthly community. It is this vast issue which in our day is opened up afresh, and it is plain that totalitarian claims on behalf of a secular view of life may be put forward in a democratic society just as much as under a dictatorship.

It cannot be made too clear that what is at stake is not only the liberty of the Church, but the health and growth of society. It is not sufficient for society to create the type of citizens that at a particular time it desires ; there must be forces at work which enable it to grow *beyond* the type. It needs the transforming influence of a standard of judgment which reaches beyond and criticizes its present attainment and purpose. That is one function of the Church ; it is, or ought to be, the salt of society. Democrats as well as Christians have cause to fear that the unconscious totalitarianism of the secular philosophy of Professor Dewey and Robinson may in the long run prove fatal to democracy.

It is obvious that this discussion opens up many deep questions which need to be further explored, and that there are also immediate practical questions for which a solution needs to be found. Some of these we shall try to follow up in the News-Letter.

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

A small volume, entitled *A New Order in English Education*,¹ by H. C. Dent, the editor of *The Times Educational Supplement*, is a book which everyone who has an interest in the future of education in this country—and who has not ?—ought to read. It is from many points of view the book we have been waiting for. It gives in small compass an admirably clear and full picture of the present position and problems of English education as a whole. But that is only incidental to its main purpose. Its importance lies in Mr. Dent's clear perception that there is no escape from fundamental social change. The only choice open to us is that of the form which the new society will take. In practice it comes to a choice between Fascism and a true democracy. What Mr. Dent is primarily concerned about is the type of society which this country must achieve or go under. That is the real subject of his book. It deals with education, because it is in the sphere of education more than in any other that the fundamental reforms can most hopefully be brought about.

The type of society which education must seek with single-minded purpose to realize may be stated in Mr. Dent's own words :—

“ The essence of democracy is belief in the sanctity, the value and the significance of human personality ; and that this can only find full expression in community with its fellows. . . . The community as a whole, and the members as individuals, find their happiness in living together in a willed, and willing, state of harmony on the basis of each for the good of all and all for the good of each ; and their purpose is a gladly co-operative endeavour to bring about a continuous enrichment of human life and its direction towards an ever closer and deeper understanding of those enduring spiritual values upon which any free, positive and progressive society must be established.”

It can hardly be questioned that the kind of society envisaged in this quotation is far more compatible with the Christian understanding of the ends of life than any form of dictatorship. The values aimed at are values which Christianity prizes. To conserve these values is the major political issue of our time, and it is consequently our Christian duty to throw ourselves whole-heartedly into the fight.

On the other hand, it would be folly to shut our eyes to the fact that, as we have already seen, it is just as possible for a democracy as for a dictatorship to elbow out

¹ London University Press, 3s. 6d. One of our members remarked to me recently about *The Times Educational Supplement* : “ I have a violent grudge against Dent ; he gives us every week far more stuff that we want to read, and ought to read, than we can possibly find time to tackle.”

Christianity in the supposed interest of social solidarity. Powerful forces, many of which are not in any way consciously hostile to Christianity, are working in this direction.¹ The vital question for the future is whether we believe in democracy (meaning by that term a society embodying the values described in the passage quoted) because we are Christians, or whether our real religion is belief in democracy, though for sentimental reasons we may be disposed to assign to Christianity a minor rôle in making it work. If Christianity is true, the second view is bound to lead to disillusionment, since it ignores the fundamental realities of man's existence.

Is it, then, possible for Christians, in view of these dangers, to give whole-hearted support to radical measures of educational reform such as are set forth in Mr. Dent's volume? The same question arises in regard to the Christian attitude to other issues, e.g. the Beveridge Report. I believe that the answer is, Yes. We may know that things are certain to work out differently from what the authors of reforms intend and expect, and that to create new opportunities is to create possibilities of evil as well as of good. *A New Order in English Education* is concerned, inevitably and rightly at this stage, with the framework of education rather than with the deeper and, in the end, far more important question of its content. But if justice and humanity demand that at the present stage in the growth of our society that necessary framework should be provided, there is a clear Christian obligation to do everything in our power to prevent the maiming and wastage of manhood and womanhood which takes place at adolescence among the mass of our boys and girls, however clearly we may see that the enactment of such measures will open up further and greater tasks.

If you want to know the present facts relating to the Church as a world-wide society, you will find them admirably presented in a small volume just published, *What is the Church doing?* by Dr. Henry P. van Dusen.² It has three main sections, dealing respectively (in a Protestant context) with the captive Churches in Europe, the young Churches in Asia and Africa, and the movements towards closer unity within the World Church.

Yours sincerely,

H. Oldham

¹ Among the many straws which show the way the wind is blowing we may note the statement of a leading speaker at the last Trades Union Congress that "the ethics of social responsibility must take the place of religious dogma"; and a resolution of the Incorporated Association of Assistant Masters in Secondary Schools that denominational or doctrinal religious instruction should be prohibited in all schools wholly or partly financed from public funds (a resolution asking for the removal of religious instruction from the curriculum of State-aided schools having been previously defeated by 104 votes to 73). It is, of course, difficult in the existing tangled situation to know whether such remarks and resolutions are aimed primarily at getting rid of the bath-water or at emptying out the baby as well.

² Student Christian Movement Press, 56 Bloomsbury Street, W.C. 1. 5s.

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